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CUBA: Castro's May Day Speech

Summary

Fidel Castro's speech on 1 May suggests that the Cuban leader is seeking to establish a dialogue with the US while simultaneously attempting to resolve the growing difficulties he faces in other foreign policy areas. At one point, Castro implied that he might attempt a resolution of the Iranian hostage crisis as part of an effort to achieve these goals.

Castro probably believes that his position as a major international figure and Cuba's well-established reputation for hostility toward the US--in combination with an appropriately timed demarche--would facilitate this effort. The initiation of such an attempt by Castro, however, would not signal a fundamental shift in his basic antipathy toward the US; rather, it would reflect his concern that traditional US-Cuban enmity not be allowed to reach a dangerous level.

Introduction

President Fidel Castro's May Day speech contains elements that suggest the Cuban leader is looking for ways to develop a less fractious means of coexistence with the US. Nevertheless, despite similar implications in his speech on 8 March, Castro is only interested in exploiting situations where cooperation with the US could prove mutually beneficial. He is not prepared to undertake fundamental policy shifts to reach an accommodation with Washington.

This memorandum represents a speculative viewpoint. Although it has been shown to working level analysts in OPA and DDO, it has not been coordinated. The author is [] the Latin America Division of the Office of Political Analysis. The memorandum reflects information available through 9 May 1980. Comments and inquiries should be addressed to Chief, Latin American Division []

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Significantly, while Castro was showing unusual restraint in his criticism of the US on May Day, his domestic propaganda organs were aggressively portraying Washington as the villain of the refugee exodus. In "cleansing" the Cuban population of its dissatisfied elements, Castro needs a foreign scapegoat to cloak his government's failure to provide adequately for its people. Moreover, his own "hawks," who two years ago warned him of heightened discontent if affluent Cuban exiles were permitted to visit their homeland, have now been tasked with purifying the population. The dominance of this hardline leadership faction bodes ill for longer term Cuban-US relations, as well as for Cuban foreign policy and adventurism in general.

Moderate Treatment of US

On May Day, Venezuela and Peru--not the US--took the brunt of Castro's criticism. The cancellation of the portion of the US "Solid Shield" amphibious exercise planned for the Guantanamo Naval Base gave the Cuban leader the opportunity to gloat at length about "forcing" the US to terminate the maneuvers; instead, he restricted himself to a relatively inoffensive, one-sentence boast that "this is a notable success of the struggle of the people and of international solidarity." After observing that the venue of "Solid Shield" had been transferred to the US east coast, he again demonstrated uncharacteristic reticence by gratuitously declining to discuss Washington's "right to conduct maneuvers on US territory. What we discuss is the right to stage maneuvers on Cuban territory." Equally important, Castro indicated that in response to the US move he was cancelling the "Giron 19" maneuvers of Cuba's Eastern Army, which were to have started on 7 May.

Castro is well aware that his reciprocal move is of no practical import to the US; rather, it is valuable to Havana because the mobilization required by the Eastern Army exercises would have involved a degree of economic dislocation. Nevertheless, rather than simply ignoring any countermove, he chose to establish publicly a cause-and-effect relationship between the US cancellation and his own, thereby implying the existence of a favorable atmosphere for Cuban reciprocity of other US gestures.

Castro's Rationale

Recalling the early days of the present US administration, when "there were some gestures that could be thought of as positive," Castro implied that a reinstitution of the bilateral relationship that existed in that less acrimonious era could be as promising to the US as to Cuba. He blamed the deterioration in relations on "the so-called hawks in the US Government" who "imposed their line of thinking," and, just prior to the sixth nonaligned summit in Havana, started the downtrend as a means of undercutting Cuban prestige.

By attributing the policy change to only one segment of the policy-making community in Washington, Castro probably believes he is smoothing the way for the US to reverse its course. He also outlined those areas where he would like to see new gestures from Washington: the "economic blockade"; SR-71 reconnaissance overflights; and the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

Castro's willingness to promote areas of common interest is motivated by the following perceptions:

- "Hawks" gaining ascendancy in Washington at the same time the hardliners in his own administration are overwhelming the more moderate elements.
- Washington and Moscow on a collision course, the outcome of which can only be calamitous for Cuba and its Revolution.
- Concern that a change in administration in Washington would hasten the downward trend in US-Soviet relations; therefore, he almost certainly feels pressure to achieve a breakthrough with the US prior to November.

Iranian Initiative?

In turning unexpectedly to Iran in the latter part of his speech, Castro appeared to be setting bait for the US.

The Cuban President implied that Havana--as an international actor with a well-established reputation for antagonism toward the US--might be able to achieve more through behind-the-scenes diplomacy than Washington has through military action or economic pressures. Keeping his rhetoric in check and forswearing a chance of belaboring the US, he discussed the Iran situation at length and outlined Cuba's policy: "We have always held the position that this problem must be resolved by political and diplomatic means instead of by force--the problem of the (US) Embassy and the hostages."

Castro has several reasons for wanting to defuse the Iran crisis. The release of the hostages through Cuban efforts, he probably believes, would create a climate difficult for the US to attempt any punitive action against Havana--no matter who wins in November. He would, in effect, be giving US "doves" ammunition to use against the "hawks."

In addition, Castro believes he would gain considerable prestige as a peacemaker in the Third World, thereby recouping some of the losses he sustained by his failure to promote a unified position within the nonaligned movement over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Moreover, attention would be deflected temporarily from Afghanistan, thus giving Moscow more time to pacify the insurgents. He also would be removing the justification for a US invasion of Iran--an action that he fears could eventually pit the US against the USSR--to Cuba's detriment.

Castro apparently believes that the hostage situation has reached the point of diminishing returns for Iran and has become a stumbling block in the consolidation of its revolution. As newcomers to social revolution, the Iranians, he thinks, can profit from the Cuban example--Tehran already has shown interest in some of Havana's revolutionary institutions--and he does not want to miss the opportunity to gain influence in such a key country. He views Iran as a possible ally of considerable political and economic value to Cuba but is worried that its potential may go unrealized if the government in Tehran is unable to stabilize the country.

Castro also would like to reverse the downward trend in Iran's relations with Iraq, a country Havana is courting because of its oil and financial wealth. The Cuban leader probably fears that increasing friction between Tehran and Baghdad eventually would compel him to choose sides, and, by acting as a divisive force within the nonaligned movement, also could complicate his role as chairman.

Castro, of course, knew before he spoke on 1 May that Iran's President Bani-Sadr had asked him, as chairman of the nonaligned, for a meeting of the movement to denounce alleged crimes by the US against Iran following the aborted rescue attempt. Usually, he would grasp such a promising chance to undercut US prestige in a multilateral forum; however, his concern over a perceived US military threat apparently has pushed him toward a more cautious path. He remains reluctant to become a stalking horse for Iran on an issue that he realizes has stirred popular US sensitivities. He also is wary of creating an international forum in which the Afghanistan situation can be raised at the expense of both Havana and Moscow.

Castro's failure to mention Bani-Sadr's petition during his lengthy discussion of Iran underscores his hesitancy to serve as a lightning rod on the hostage issue. Should Bani-Sadr persevere in pressing his proposal, Castro may go through the motions of sounding out the nonaligned membership on formal support for Iran. Nonetheless, the Cuban President probably would prefer--and may even so advise Bani-Sadr--that the environment for nonaligned action on Iran's behalf be enhanced through release of the hostages.

In the wake of Bani-Sadr's request, therefore, Castro's stated belief that the hostage problem must be resolved by "political and diplomatic means" seems particularly significant. It suggests that he sees the possibility for helping Iran and the US achieve valuable goals at the same time that Cuba, as intermediary, gains considerable bilateral and multilateral benefits.

Nonetheless, Castro is aware of the near anarchy in Iran and must realize that the fate of the hostages is in

hands other than Bani-Sadr's. He seems willing to attempt to mediate, however, possibly in the belief that his revolutionary and anti-US credentials may give him an advantage with the hostages' captors not open to other potential Western mediators. The Cuban leader may believe that even if an attempt failed, he would gain political capital in international circles for having undertaken the effort.

Although in his 8 March address Castro acknowledged his willingness to engage in a dialogue with the US, he gave no such indication on May Day. This omission suggests he may believe that he has a better chance of success on the hostage issue if he can persuade Tehran that he is acting on his own initiative rather than at the request of the US. His foreign minister was in Iran in early May, but we do not know if the hostages were one of the subjects he wanted to discuss. Cuban press reports indicate that the foreign minister's visit dealt with the opening of a resident Cuban diplomatic mission in Tehran, Iran's efforts to convoke a special meeting of the nonaligned movement to discuss US "aggression," and Cuba's diplomatic efforts to find peaceful solutions to the conflicts in southeast Asia.

Outlook

Any cooperation that may develop with the US over the Cuban refugee problem or the Iranian situation should not be interpreted as a fundamental shift in Havana's longstanding policy of hostility toward the US. Castro is willing to cooperate for the moment because he needs a dumping ground for several hundred thousand disaffected Cubans and because he needs to placate the US and restore unity to the nonaligned movement he is chairing. As in the past, he will temporarily mute his verbal attacks on Washington if he believes it tactically wise. Eventually, however, he will resume open hostility toward the US, thus reasserting the essence of the philosophical underpinnings of his regime.

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